

THE ADVENTURE OF DIDEROT'S *ENCYCLOPAEDIA*

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Introduction

What is the *Encyclopaedia*, published from 1751 to 1772? Everyone knows the name of this book without knowing what it is. So, here is what his main publisher, Diderot, told us about it. "The purpose of an encyclopaedia is to collect knowledge disseminated around the globe; to set forth its general system to the men with whom we live, and transmit it to those who will come after us, so that the work of preceding centuries will not become useless to the centuries to come; and so that our offspring, becoming better instructed, will at the same time become more virtuous and happy, and that we should not die without having rendered a service to the human race in the future years to come." Such a program goes far beyond simply making a dictionary. Indeed, instruction, virtue, happiness, humankind, the program of the *Encyclopaedia* is the very program of Enlightenment.

Part 1 – Origin and development of the *Encyclopaedia*

First of all, you need to know that in 1745 it was originally meant to be a simple editorial translation company. The 18th century was dictionaries' golden age. To us, today, there's nothing more ordinary than a dictionary. We have all kinds of them. But at the time, dictionaries were still a novelty. The first French dictionaries only appeared at the end of the 17th century. It was Furetière's *Dictionnaire*. And the public manifested at the time a very keen taste for dictionaries, which then saw a remarkable expansion.

And so in Paris, in the middle of the 18th century, the idea came to four booksellers, "booksellers" at the time meaning both manufacturers and books sellers; four booksellers called Briasson, David, Le Breton and Durand, to give an enhanced French translation to a very successful English work, the Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopaedia or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, which had been published in two volumes in London in 1728.

And in 1747, two young scholars, Diderot and D'Alembert, still of a rather modest reputation but of rare intellectual depth, were charged by the booksellers of this edition. In their hands, everything changed. The English work, the *Cyclopaedia*, was only two volumes, whereas the French work was supposed to, at the origin of the project, constitute ten volumes, as we can see on the prospectus. But at its completion, the *Encyclopaedia* reached 28 volumes, 17 of speeches and articles, 11 of illustrations plates. It took Diderot more than twenty-five years of work.

When the second editor, D'Alembert, moved away from the endeavour in 1758, another man, the Chevalier de Jaucourt, became the true second editor. That is why we say *Encyclopaedia* of Diderot, D'Alembert and Jaucourt. Moreover, the *Encyclopaedia* was completed in two stages. The last articles' volumes were published in 1765 and the last plates volumes in 1772. How did the public perceive it?

Part 2 – The success of the *Encyclopaedia*

Published using subscription, it had more than 4000 subscribers, which is a huge figure for the time. The *Encyclopaedia* was the largest publishing venture of the 18th century, not only in volume number but also in human forces used to develop it, as well as in invested capital. And it was a huge success, as shown by the multiple counterfeits and more or less pirates' reissues.

For example, a mark of its notoriety at the time, we see it on the desk of the Marquise de Pompadour alongside Voltaire's *Henriade* and Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. Voltaire, who was well experienced, estimated that the financial income of the associated booksellers surpassed that of the international French trade. Which was not the case for the editors Diderot, D'Alembert and Jaucourt, sadly for them.

Part 3 – The *Encyclopaedia's* characteristics and great innovations

Five great innovations marked the *Encyclopaedia*. First, it was a collective enterprise. It appealed to scientists, great specialists in different fields, Daubenton, Rousseau, Dumarsais, D'Alembert, of course, Turgot, d'Holbach, Quesnay and many others, not to mention the anonymous, artisans or artists. Nearly 200 employees, mostly from the Ancient Regime bourgeoisie, technicians or practitioners involved in productive activities of the time. We will come back to this.

It was a dictionary, but a sensible one. In theory, each field of knowledge went with the articles to which they belong, and above all they were linked by an extensive network of references between articles. These references prefigured today's hypertext links.

Another innovation: it contained an actual dictionary of current French language, which no other encyclopaedia, whether contemporaneous or even today, contains. At the same time as knowledge, it transmitted the language used to convey this knowledge. It also included professions into what was commonly perceived as wisdom. It described, detailed and illustrated the gestures and tools of human work.

Finally, it is illustrated. These were the famous *Encyclopaedia* illustrations plates. But beyond these innovative features, what characterised the *Encyclopaedia* is above all to have been a critical collection, critical of knowledge, of its elaboration, its transmission, its representation, but also critical of language and prejudices conveyed by its use, criticising interdicts of thought, and especially of authority and dogma.

I would conclude by saying that the *Encyclopaedia*, attempt of a philosophical century, as Diderot said, bequeathed to distant posterity, was the most watched and censored work of his time. It testified to what the Enlightenment was: a thirst for knowledge, freedom of thought, a desire to invent and a need to doubt.